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Editorial —

JFK POORLY ADVISED ON CUBAN INVASION

So long as Americans gather, the Bay of Pigs fiasco will be discussed. Gradually more information is coming to light. Did the United States fail to keep its promises and commitments?

This week Life magazine publishes the second instalment from the forthcoming book. "One Thousand Days", written by historian and presidential advisor Arthur M. Schlesinger, jr., who says that in the Bay of Pigs fiasco President Kennedy learned the hard way that "contingency planning could generate its own momentum and create its own reality".

The article continues:

Kennedy heard about the Cuban invasion plans 12 days after his election. CIA Director Allen Dulles briefed the new President on plans, already well-advanced, for an amphibious operation. Kennedy gave directions for the program to proceed, with the understanding that interest did not mean commitment.

That go-ahead, Schlesinger adds, set in motion diplomatic and military machinery Kennedy later found it impossible to control fully.

In the weeks that followed, Schlesinger notes, government "floated as in a void. Neither the outgoing nor the incoming administrations wanted to make fundamental decisions, and most matters continued to move along existing tracks."

On the Cuban invasion plan, Schlesinger writes in Life, Kennedy was forced to rely on advisors with whom he was not familiar, particularly the entrenched military and intelligence personnel who were unanimous in their approval of the proposed attack plan.

"If someone comes in to tell me this or that about the minimum wage bill," Kennedy remarked, "I have no hesitation in overruling them. But you always assume that the military intelligence people have some secret skill not available to ordinary mortals."

Dulles, Schlesinger says, was not able to provide Kennedy with good, analytic advice, chiefly because he himself was so personally involved in the project.

"Dulles and Richard M. Bissell, jr., also of the CIA accepted progressive modifications so long as the expedition in some form remained; perhaps they unconsciously supposed that once the operation began to unfold, it would not be permitted to fail."

alive, the historian adds, sprang from the embarrassment of calling it off. Even if the Cuban Brigade was successfully disbanded, its members would disperse, disappointed and resentful, all over Latin America. Having created the Brigade as an option, the CIA now presented its use against Cuba as a necessity.

Confronted by this argument, Kennedy tentatively agreed that the simplest thing, after all, might be to let the Cubans go where they yearned to go — to Cuba. But he insisted that the plans be drawn on the basis of "no United States military intervention," a stipulation to which no one involved made any objection.

In late March, while Secretary of State Dean Rusk was attending a SEATO conference, Acting Secretary Chester Bowles sat in on a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and was horrified by what he heard of the Cuban invasion plan. On March 31 he gave Rusk a strong memorandum opposing the idea, but Kennedy never saw it.

At a State Department meeting on April 4, 1961, Senator J. William Fulbright denounced the whole idea. The operation, he said, was wildly out of proportion to the threat. "Fulbright gave a brave, old-fashioned American speech — honorable, sensitive, strong — and left everyone in the room, except me and possibly the President wholly unmoved."

The Life article includes these other interesting sidelights on the Bay of Pigs invasion:

—Robert Amory, jr., deputy director of the CIA for intelligence, was not informed at any point about any aspect of the operation. "The need-to-know standard, i.e., that no one should be told about the project unless it became operationally necessary, had the idiotic effect of excluding much of the expertise of government at a time when every alert newspaperman knew something was afoot."

—"Nothing had been more depressing . . . than to watch a collection of officials prepare to sacrifice the world's growing faith in the new American President in order to defend interests and pursue objectives of their own. Dean Rusk was almost alone in recognizing this problem; but his solution was the curious one of suggesting that someone other than the President make the final decision."

—Dean Rusk, on reaction to his suggestion that the invasion be launched from the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay: "It is interesting to observe the Pentagon people. They are perfectly willing to put the President's head on the block, but they recoil from

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the idea of doing anything which might risk Guantanamo."

Kennedy had repeatedly insisted that no U.S. military personnel be involved in the invasion attempt. Despite this, the first man ashore on each of the invasion beaches was an American frogman. The President sent Schlesinger and Adolph Berle to New York to re-emphasize the American non-participation to the Cuban Revolutionary Council. "But the misunderstanding remained; Miro Cardona claimed later that he had been promised 10,000 U.S. troops. Miro's knowledge of English or the translation was sadly at fault and, in any event, Miro probably heard what he desperately wanted to hear."

The Schlesinger account of the Cuban failure is filled with examples of Kennedy's personal courage. When the invasion was clearly disintegrating and militarily and diplomatically, Kennedy canceled the important second air strike, dooming the efforts of the liberators.

"Some people, Kennedy noted, were arguing that failure would cause irreparable harm, that we had no choice but to commit U.S. forces," Schlesinger says. "Kennedy disagreed. Defeat, he said, would be an incident, not disaster. But would not U.S. prestige suffer if we let the rebellion flicker out? 'What is prestige?' Kennedy asked. 'Is it the shadow of power or the substance of power?'"

The President, nonetheless, was deeply disturbed by the failure.

"The vision haunted him of the men on the beaches," Schlesinger writes, "the men who had gone off with such splendid hopes, had fought so bravely and now would be shot down like dogs or carried off to Castro's prisons."

"The only times Jackie had seen him weep were in the hospital at moments of sheer discouragement over his back; tears would fill his eyes and roll down his cheeks. Now, in the bedroom, he put his head down into his hands and almost sobbed."

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